



Committee and Date

Cabinet

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RESETTLEMENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

Responsible Officer: Andy Begley

e-mail: andy.begley@shropshire.gov.uk Tel: 01743 258911

1. Summary

- This report sets out the current context relating to Syrian resettlement in Shropshire Local Authority Area.
- It focuses on the 15 families already resettled throughout Shropshire along with the joint working with Children's Services regarding Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children.
- It also notes the request by UK Visa's and Immigration (UKVI) for Shropshire to consider Asylum Dispersal within Shropshire.

2. Recommendations

- To agree a further commitment to resettle 10 Syrian families during 2018/19.
- To agree a response to UKVI in regard to the request for Shropshire to commit to Asylum Dispersal in Shropshire.

REPORT

3. Context – National

The Syrian refugee resettlement programme has been running nationally for some time focusing on women, children and the most vulnerable individuals in need. However, the announcement of 20,000 refugees widened the scheme's criteria. (For clarity 20,000 refugees relates to individuals not families).

A Cross Party Working Group was established in Shropshire to respond to the Syrian refugee crisis and to support the Syrian resettlement programme which will support 20,000 people to resettle in the UK.

The group consists of Councillors representing each of the political parties, Shropshire Council Adult Services, Children's Services, Safeguarding and Housing services,

Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly, West Mercia Police, Shropshire CCG and Shropshire Fire and Rescue service.

Shropshire Council committed to the resettling of 15 Syrian families in the County. This equated to 63 individuals being welcomed into the County between June 2016 - March 2017. The families have been resettled in 4 different locations throughout the County – Oswestry (5 families), Shrewsbury (5 families), Wem (3 families) and Much Wenlock (2 families).

Local Authorities are given dates in advance of when cohorts of families are to arrive, with approximately 4 weeks' notice of which families are suitable for their area. Local Authorities are able to consider numerous families to ensure they can meet the need ie, school places, health needs etc and refuse families they do not believe they can support.

Arrivals involve charter flights arriving at a central airport, families being met by representatives from the local authorities and onward coach transfers direct to accommodation. The emphasis is on immediate settlement into local communities with no "holding" accommodation and Shropshire has engaged with this fully by ensuring all families have permanent accommodation.

One family from Wem has opted to move to Birmingham as they had friends and family already settled in this area. This reduced individuals to 59. However we have welcomed 2 births in 2017 with a further 2 due in 2018 taking the total individuals back up to 63.

4. Context – Shropshire

With 13 of the 15 families having now exited Refugee Action support (the final 2 families leave at the end of March 2018) the families are now engaging with mainstream support. The end of the first 12 months is a point at which we can review the past 12 months and how far they have come. Refugee Action staff and volunteers hold a small party with all the families to celebrate the integration and resettlement achievements they have made in the UK – from being picked up at the airport on that initial day to where they are now.

The first week is full of intensive support delivered by Refugee Action staff and volunteers, including important activities to settle the refugees into their new community such as introducing the refugees to their new home, and housing officer; getting to know their local area; meeting their GP; navigating the benefits system at the Job Centre; discovering UK food stuffs & supermarkets; and meeting the Welcome Groups.

At the end of the 12 months the families are well equipped for the transition to year 2 in the UK, but when needed, future help is in place from Sustain support workers, Welcome's Groups, Enable and other mainstream services where required.

Legal;

- All families have received two appointments of Immigration Advice along with support to change their Humanitarian Protection Status to Refugee Status;
- A few families have been assisted to replace their Biometric Residence Permit due to loss or a spelling error.

Employment & Volunteering;

- Many of the men and women are volunteering in the community including one client who is working for a community transport company who have supported him to pass his UK driving test;
- Several clients took their Theory Driving Test in Belfast with Arabic support and passed. Many clients are working hard with Welcome Groups to pass the Theory & Practical driving test in English;
- The Job Centre has told us that the refugees are actively seeking work, but language continues to be a barrier. Enable have been commissioned to assist with preparation for work sessions and work placements in order to improve conversational and work related English language skills.

Education & English Language;

- Each adult is averaging about 6 hours ESOL a week. The children have settled well in schools, and the families are engaging with the school and school event & activities. The young people are delighted to be attending college, and their English language skills are greatly improved.

Housing;

- Most families have settled well into their neighborhood and with support have addressed any issues. All families are now receiving tenancy support via Sustain.

Health and Wellbeing;

- The families have been supported to attend numerous NHS appointments including GP's and dentists. It was challenging to ensure the NHS arrange for interpreters to attend appointments, but in partnership with the CCG this has now improved;
- One woman is deeply concerned about her father back home who has cancer. It's affecting her wellbeing. She is receiving informal support as she is reluctant to engage with anything formal as it's unfamiliar to her;
- Another client was devastated when his brother was severely injured in a bombing in Syria. He has been offered emotional and practical support with this upsetting situation.

Benefits and Finance

- The families have been supported to navigate the Benefits system and this will continue as we see the rollout of Universal Credit. They have worked in partnership with the Council Benefits department and the Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Social and Relationships

- The Welcome's Groups have assisted the families to engage with their local community and neighbours with many stories of neighbours and friends assisting them to attend sessions such as swimming, coffee mornings and school events.
- Many of the families have helped at school events with some running a stall selling Syrian food.

Media

- There have been several positive stories in the local and national press which have been coordinated between Shropshire Council and Refugee Action.

Hate Crime

- Generally, the families have been welcomed and have not experienced hate crime.

5. Planning for the future

During the first 12 months of being in Shropshire, all of the families have been supported by Refugee Action who were the commissioned service for the resettlement of the families. Refugee Action undertake significant work with the families including pre-arrival planning to ensure all is in place for families' arrival, meeting the refugees at the airport and settling them into their accommodation, arranging and supporting them to attend initial appointments with GPs and DWP and with initial orientation in their local area. Supporting them to set up bank accounts, budget, integrate into their local community, access and attend ESOL among other areas. Refugee Action's approach is based around an empowerment model whereby refugees are encouraged to be as independent as possible to ensure they are better able to integrate to their local communities.

An operational group was set up to discuss the arrival of families, as well as their ongoing integration. This group allowed Refugee Action to link in with numerous departments within Shropshire Council to ensure a smooth transition for the families in regard to Housing Benefit and Council Tax claims. It has also meant a fortnightly update on how the families were doing, as well as strengthening working relationships to enable us to deal with any incidents such as behaviour of children in schools or emergency hospital appointments.

Before the families arrived in Shropshire there were 2 welcome groups set up. One in Oswestry (Oswestry Welcomes Refugees) and one in Shrewsbury (Shropshire Welcomes Refugees). Between them they have in excess of 500 registered volunteer's willing and able to support the families with a range of issues. In essence the welcome's groups complement the commissioned Resettlement services provided by Refugee Action. They have access to a number of interpreters and translators who have proved invaluable when setting up benefits, applying for PIP claims and resolving issues with their properties. As many of the families move into year 2 the welcome groups have applied for and been successful in being awarded grant funding to pick up some of service that were provided by Refugee Action during year 1.

Shropshire has a tight knit but wide reaching network of support available for the Syrian families. There are people who support them daily, through to those who only dip in when needed. The infrastructure is supportive of all the families, as well as professionals involved. We have had organised parties, trips to Ireland to undertake an Arabic driving test, babysitting and fundraising events galore! I believe the structure and organisation around our Syrian families that has developed in Shropshire over the past 24 months is a testament to the positivity of Shropshire and the welcoming nature of the residents.

12 of the remaining 14 families have now moved into year 2 of their resettlement in the UK. This has meant that the support from Refugee Action has ended and they are reliant on mainstream support. All the families in Shropshire have been well-equipped for this transition due to the type of support received in Year 1 which has focussed on fostering their independence. As such, the 'step-down' of support has come at an appropriate time to support their continued integration into Shropshire communities. All the families who have entered into year 2 have access to a Sustain support worker who they see approximately every 1 – 2 weeks. I have set up an operational meeting where I meet with the Sustain workers every 2 months to discuss any issues arising with the families and I am the point of contact for any concerns they may have.

The welcome groups have both recently applied for and been successful in being awarded grant funding to assist them as organisations to continue. Their aim is to work specifically

with the families in their patch to ensure they are able to access ESOL and to support them into employment where appropriate. In essence they have picked up where Refugee Action left off, but in a more informal manner.

The majority of the adults have undertaken voluntary work and are keen to engage with paid employment. The issue that arises time and time again is that they have little experience of work in the UK and they need to improve their English. I have therefore liaised with Enable and I am in the process of setting up a contract for them to work with the families to support the adults to access employment through work placements and work experience. The aim is to provide them with skills necessary for the workplace as well as improve their conversational English to assist them in being more suitable for employment.

Shropshire Council is prime to accept more families and further assist with the resettlement of families. Refugee Action is currently working with Children's Services in relation to the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children but this contract has been added on to the one they had relating to the resettlement of the Syrian families and so will end in March 2018.

The main aims and activities of the project are to ensure that young asylum seekers:

- have information about their asylum application, the decision making process and their options at key stages
- are supported in adjusting to life in the UK, building friendships, life skills and support networks in Shropshire and the UK
- have the information and help they need to achieve their personal goals

The project is being delivered by a part time Refugee Action Project Coordinator, working from Shrewsbury and on an outreach basis in Shropshire, with support from a small team of volunteers. It is key that if we are to retain the skills and experience of the Refugee Action support workers that we commit to welcome further families into Shropshire. In essence the resettlement of the Syrian families can assist with the support needed for the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children and initiatives set up for the families can benefit Children's Services and the work they do with the Young People.

Both the welcomes groups are keen to be involved with any future families that resettle in Shropshire and in fact many of the family members are keen to mentor any future families.

6. Funding

Below are details of the funding for the full 5 year programme. This funding is ongoing for the time the families are resident in the Shropshire area. Based on our experience of the initial 15 families, this funding enables us to fully support the families with no financial impact on the Local Authority. It is also worth noting that Education and Health apply for money separately to us (see Education figures below).

Based on this we received £536,760 for year one.

UNIT COSTS FOR SYRIAN RESETTLEMENT SCHEME – PER INDIVIDUAL – YEAR ONE ONLY					
	Adult Benefit Claimant	Other Adults	Children 5-18	Children 3-4	Children U.3
Resettlement Costs	£8520	£8520	£8520	£8520	£8520
Education	n/a	n/a	£4500	£2250	£0.00

Below are details of the funding received by the Local Authority for the initial 15 (now 14) families for years 2-5.

Year 2 – £295,000

Year 3 – £218,300

Year 4 – £135,700

Year 5 – £59,000

UNIT COSTS FOR SYRIAN RESETTLEMENT SCHEME – PER INDIVIDUAL				
Timeframe	13-24 Months (Year 2)	25-36 Months (Year 3)	37-48 Months (Year 4)	49-60 Months (Year 5)
Rate	£5,000	£3,700	£2,300	£1,000

Although the funding is specifically to be used for the resettlement and integration of the Syrian families, in Shropshire, we have found that a number of initiatives set up for either the families and / or the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children benefit both groups. This means we are able to work together to benefit a larger group of individuals.

7. Asylum Dispersal

The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Programme is not to be confused with the Asylum Dispersal Scheme, although the 2 are both managed by the same Home Office department. Asylum dispersal is supported by the Government through the appointment of regional providers. The provider for the West midlands is G4S. Seven Local Authorities have supported asylum dispersal within the West Midlands region since its introduction in 2000, engaging positively with the Home Office and its providers to find appropriate accommodation solutions.

The Asylum and Immigration Act 1999, and its provisions, were implemented with the intention and purpose of ensuring that asylum seekers were dispersed across the UK and that no one local authority, area, or region became over-proliferated with those seeking support through the asylum system. The Act also makes direct provision for the Secretary of State to provide support for those claiming asylum and to instruct the cooperation and support of local authorities in doing so.

In a letter received by Shropshire Council on 27th November 2017, the Home Office are requesting that Shropshire Council gives their agreement for the placement of an initial cohort of asylum seekers.

The letter goes on to state that UK Visa's and Immigration (UKVI) will work with all local authorities who commit to resettling Asylum Seekers in their area and will be guided by the authority on the numbers that can be supported. Although it needs to be noted that 25 individuals are seen as a minimum.

UKVI also commit to be guided by the Local Authority on the most practicable areas for resettlement, although suggests the area needs to have good transport links and services. The letter goes on to suggest that where Local Authorities have already resettled Syrian families that this would be a good area to consider as the links and support are already in place.

UKVI state they are happy for the roll out to take shape at a pace with which the Local Authority is comfortable. With other new areas this has been over a three to six month period, which allows time to source the properties, for the Local Authority to consider them, and for the Provider to bring them up to the standards of the contract. Inspections of properties can be done with the Provider and UKVI to enable conversations about the contractual requirements with relevant officers.

Note, the local authority will not receive any specific funding from UKVI in relation to the accepting of adult asylum seekers.

8. Conclusion

It would be difficult for Shropshire Council to engage in both these resettlement schemes. Although an infrastructure has been set up to support the Syrian refugees, this is specifically in relation to support for young people and families. Although the resettlement of the Syrian families has been positively welcomed in Shropshire, this is in part due to the fact they are families with young children who can easily integrate with their neighbours and communities. As the Syrian families arrive with refugee status they are able to access employment as well as mainstream services and benefits, this is not something asylum dispersal allows.

Given the lack of 1 bedroom accommodation and the projected increase in the number of single homeless applicants due to the homeless reduction act there are concerns about how Shropshire would manage an influx of 25 single males (minimum) along with concerns about the leasing of a large building for the accommodation of the cohort of asylum seekers and the impact this could have on a community. However, equally the splitting of the cohort across the County would have a significant impact on the ability to provide relevant support along with the issues of a lack of transport and dedicated support networks that asylum seekers would require.

There is limited OISC-regulated immigration advice available in the county (the Syrian families have had to travel to Wolverhampton) and this would have a significant impact on those going through the asylum system given the in-depth and specialist advice they require. Additionally, any asylum seekers refused asylum would be at risk of their support being terminated and being made destitute which would have wider implications for the Local Authority.

In conclusion, the suggestion is that Shropshire would not be able to appropriately meet the needs of adult asylum seekers and that due to this they would follow friends and family to larger cities where they can engage with the support they require. Learning from decisions made by a number of the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children who have arrived in Shropshire, it is likely that as soon as they are able, the adult asylum seekers will seek out an area that meets their needs better than Shropshire can, thereby causing a constant churn of new individuals who have no links or want to remain in Shropshire.

9. Decisions Required

- Should Shropshire commit to the resettlement of a further 10 Syrian families in Shropshire, utilising the established infrastructure and support in place?
- Should Shropshire commit to assist in Asylum dispersal?

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)
Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder) Cllr Lee Chapman
Local Member Covers Shropshire County area
Appendices Dispersal Scheme for Adult Asylum Seekers – <i>Letter from UK Visas & Immigration</i>